

“If there is one attitude more dangerous than to assume that a future war will be just like the last one, it is to imagine that it will be so utterly different that we can afford to ignore all the lessons of the last one.”

— Former RAF Marshal, Sir John Slessor,
Air Power and Armies, 1936

Civil Engineering After the Gulf War: A New Focus

Air Force civil engineering has undergone many changes in the 10 years since the Gulf War. By the time the cease-fire was declared in February 1991, Prime BEEF and RED HORSE teams had provided crucial combat support at more than 25 sites in Southwest Asia, in addition to multiple sites in Europe and at locations stretching from England to Diego Garcia. While our mission was achieved with great success, it also generated some important lessons learned.

The Gulf War was a wakeup call for contingency training. When it began, many in CE had never trained on bare base equipment. Our “readiness” focus was on a Cold War scenario that concentrated our efforts on rapid runway repair and base recovery after attack. After DESERT STORM, the focus of contingency training shifted dramatically, and since then we’ve made continuous improvements in both training and equipment. Our success today is linked to those investments.

Our deployments continued to increase after the Gulf War. We left troops in Southwest Asia, then sent more to the Balkans. We executed support operations in Korea and Latin America. At the same time, the U.S. military reorganized and downsized. Our military engineer force dropped almost half in size. The increased pace in operations took a high toll on both those who deployed and those who covered the extra workload at home.

Our Cold War concepts were ill suited to the demands of smaller scale regional conflicts and peacekeeping operations. And so, the Expeditionary Aerospace Force (EAF) concept has evolved to allow the Air Force to adapt to its changing mission. The EAF is our direction for the 21st century — we must be extraordinarily “agile” while maintaining high-quality service at our home bases.

On this 10th anniversary of the Gulf War, the basics we require to be an expeditionary force are in place, and we are ready to adapt quickly to various deployments and contingencies. We deploy quickly and effectively, and we are ready to do the job when we get there — from building and sustaining bare bases to delivering humanitarian supplies.

Our transformation to the EAF has not come without growing pains, and we still have much to do before we have it “exactly right.” However, I’m 100 percent confident that no matter what task might be levied on us, Air Force Civil Engineers are fully ready to provide commanders in the field the full spectrum of engineering support they need. History has shown that we are ready, we are agile, and we are very, very good!